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SELECTED PAPERS

The Mysteries and Challenges of Jerry Garcia as Subject

JIM NEWTON

Writing about Jerry Garcia poses special challenges for the biographer. He is a tantalizing figure—a participant and observer of consequential events and ideas, intelligent, sharp, and captivating—but an elusive one, too. In many tellings of the 1960s and their long aftermath, Garcia lingers at the edge of the story, popping up at Woodstock or Altamont, anchoring a scene in the Haight, but never really speaking or adding much. History tends to regard him more as a caricature—the bearded hippie who clung to his ways as the world changed around him—than as a fully developed person and subject.

Some of that is simply the bias of historians, of course, but some of it reflects Garcia's way of living—and, in a curious way, underscores the sincerity of his humility. At no point in his life did Garcia regard himself as a historical subject and so he did not self-consciously preserve his legacy. Garcia did not keep a diary, nor did he regularly correspond with intimate friends and family. He did not save letters. He did not keep extensive personal records and did not, at least intentionally, see that personal material was preserved for historians. He did not maintain a regular schedule nor stick to anything that one might regard as a routine.

The most obvious source of insight is also misleading. Garcia performed thousands of times and left a rich musical and lyrical history, but it can be distorting to impute to him the values and sentiments he sang, since most of those lyrics were composed by Robert Hunter. It is complicated proposition to consider Garcia's role in the meaning of words he

uttered from the stage, even though his performances powerfully affected so many. What is clear is that Garcia helped shape those words, even if he did not write all of them; he chose and edited them, and he gave them depth and meaning that they lacked on the page. It was his job, as Hunter wrote and Garcia sang, to “shed light and not to master” (Trist and Dodd 2015, 263n2).

There are other complexities that stand in the way of a clear read on Garcia as subject. He valued intimacy—he was married three times—but was at best a haphazard husband and father; how to reconcile that seeming contradiction? And, of course, his adult life was often experienced on drugs—marijuana and LSD in the early years; later, cocaine and heroin, all of which combined to render his memory of certain events and periods incomplete or incorrect.

Garcia is my fifth biographical subject, and for all those reasons, he is the most challenging. It hardly needs noting that the personal reflections of Earl Warren, Dwight Eisenhower, and Jerry Brown were more carefully catalogued and preserved than those of Jerry Garcia. It is also true that their personalities, though layered and complex, are more accessible in many ways than that of Garcia. That is not to say that he is beyond our ability to understand. The keys to Garcia are, in my view, of three types, best utilized in combination with one another: the reflections of intimates, the interpretations of other cultural figures, and the scores of interviews that he participated in across the decades. All present their own advantages and limitations, but taken together—and supplemented by some bolstering written material—they allow a fuller picture of Garcia to emerge, especially when laid across the events of his lifetime. Any Garcia biographer must therefore engage in a kind of triangulation, comparing sources and using one set to fill in the gaps left by the others in ever-shifting combinations. It is not for the faint-hearted.

To the task: First, reflections. Garcia’s life was lived in a community of observant, articulate counterparts. His brother Tiff left us with thoughts on their shared childhood, and as Jerry Garcia plunked his way into adolescence and beyond, he fell into the company of Robert Hunter, the Merry Pranksters, and the Palo Alto music and arts scene. From the beginning, then, he was surrounded by perceptive people who took note

of him and marked their reactions to him. Their observations give a biographer many scenes of Garcia at work—writing, thinking, playing. Ken Babbs, Joan Baez, Ed McClanahan, Sandy Rothman, Ken Kesey, and especially Sara Ruppenthal all lived through Garcia's early adulthood and filed away their experiences with him—in Ruppenthal's case, their marriage and daughter left them in lasting contact. They saw Garcia in different contexts, but a consistent picture of him emerges across their perspectives: Garcia was charismatic and interesting to be around; he was sometimes obsessive and in some ways contradictory. He could be astonishingly indifferent as a husband and parent, for instance, and yet he constructed a family of sorts, united by a shared appreciation for musical expression and the nurturing of a community within which to explore that. He was an artist, and he stood at the center of an artistic community. For the biographer, that is especially useful because it means that observations about Garcia came from those particularly well-suited to observe and record their impressions.

That continued as his life and career unfolded, most notably in the company of fellow band members and others close to the Grateful Dead. Three of his bandmates—Phil Lesh, Bill Kreutzmann and Mickey Hart—have written memoirs, and Bob Weir is working on one. Rock Scully and Sam Cutler each have told their stories. Garcia's second wife, Carolyn Garcia (forever known as Mountain Girl) has written a partial account of their life together. Predictably, those memoirs are of varying quality; there is no reason to think that the skills it takes to be a drummer, for example, would also produce a writer, which may be why both Hart and Kreutzmann relied on cowriters. That complicates how we approach those books, but all of the band memoirs are particularly double-edged. On one hand, every other member of the Grateful Dead understood that his relationship with Garcia was his most important connection to the band, and so Garcia figures preeminently in each of those accounts.

The books by members of the Dead and those close to the band, however, suffer from a different problem when it comes to placing Garcia in the larger counterculture and understanding the ways that he influenced it and it influenced him. By definition, members of the band were physically and psychologically set apart from that culture; it unfolded directly

at their feet but, especially in later years, they were separated by a stage and security. Once the Dead played large venues, the audience, in a sense, was an abstraction: Small, blurry figures sometimes hundreds of yards away, it was less a collection of people than a palate of color and motion. The experience of being one of 55,501 fans at Chicago Field was not the same experience as being one of the band members who performed for and with them.

Fame made it difficult for the Dead to mix with the culture that they came to symbolize. In their memoirs, members of the band sometimes seem more puzzled than insightful at the impact of their music on the larger culture, though that also owes something to the Dead's resolute skewering of pretension and their genuine sense of modesty, which shines through interviews. Their memoirs, then, offer helpful scenes and insights into the workings of the band but tend to feel thin in considering life outside the circle of the Dead and its entourage.

The converse is true when it comes to the memoirs and memories of other figures in the counterculture, whose stories may address larger issues but whose insights into Garcia are minimal and refracted. Tom Hayden, Todd Gitlin, Joan Baez, Peter Coyote, Angela Davis, Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, and others have produced thoughtful reflections on the counterculture and its meaning for American arts and politics, in forms ranging from autobiography to poetry. In some cases, Baez and Coyote for instance, those reflections include first-hand appreciations of Garcia. In almost all, they comprehend the vitality of the music of the period in helping to shape its ambitions, values and understandings. But where those works are strongest at seeing the large story, they are weakest at unveiling its more intimate aspects. They supplement the first-hand accounts of others, but they do not substitute for them.

That leaves personal papers and interviews, including my own inquiries with those close to Garcia and involved in the counterculture as well as those of Garcia himself. My insights have benefitted from conversations with those closest to Garcia personally: Mountain Girl and Sara Ruppenthal-Katz have supplied some of the most insightful details into the life of their former husband; Dennis McNally, Steve Silberman, Rosie McGee, Bob Bralove and others have offered insights into periods

of their relationship with the band and Garcia. Likewise, Merry Prankster and author Ken Babbs provided me thoughtful reflections on his friendship with Garcia, and Ken Kesey's papers, preserved at the University of Oregon in Eugene (helpfully, just a few miles from Mountain Girl's house) include correspondence and reflections that illuminate much of Garcia's early adult years, not from the closeness of intimacy with Garcia but with the acuity of a skilled writer and the perspective of a thoughtful observer. For the story of the larger culture and Garcia's place within it, sources such as Coyote, Al Franken, Jerry Brown, Gillian Welch, and Jane Fonda offer valuable insights, as did Tom Hayden, who spoke to me at length before his death in 2016.

Those sources have varying degrees of connection to Garcia personally. Franken spent time with him in the 1980s, Coyote did over many years beginning in the 1960s; Brown barely knew him at all and Welch was a fan, but they all link the Dead and Garcia to the significant developments in American politics and culture from the 1960s through the present. Other interviews have been conducted and preserved by others. The library at UC Santa Cruz includes the recorded conversations of McNally and a few others. Interview subjects include Garcia himself, as well as members of the Dead and many others close to the band. Blair Jackson, a formidable writer and chronicler of the Dead, enriched his *Garcia: An American Life* with his many productive interviews. More recently, the Bluegrass Hall of Fame in Kentucky, which hosted a Garcia exhibition in 2024, meticulously collected interviews with David Grisman and others, capturing those memories before they slipped away and preserving them for researchers.

Which leaves a last and most important source of material on Garcia: Garcia himself. For more than three decades, Garcia was a generous interview subject. He enjoyed conversation, and his openness distinguished him from the overwhelming majority of interview subjects. He did not use interviews to sell albums or promote tours; he was not running for office, advancing an agenda or promoting candidates. He was curious and open and his disarming candor could be mistaken for a lack of concern for how his remarks might be misinterpreted or misconstrued, inadvertently or otherwise. The trust that conveyed was often a real defense,

turning an unpromising interview into one that made a contribution to the record. And so, without ever jotting a note in a diary, he created a provocative record of his thinking across the years—one that even speaks in its silences.

Some of the interviews are legendary, none more so than the exhaustive conversation between Garcia, Mountain Girl, Charles Reich and Jann Wenner, published in 1972 in *Rolling Stone* and, following that, expanded and released in book form as *Garcia: A Signpost to New Space*, which includes the famous “Stoned Sunday Rap.” That multipart interview with an intelligent and admiring interlocutor recorded Garcia at his most thoughtful and remains a singular look at his thinking at the time. It includes his reflections on the Grateful Dead’s musical collection up to that point, as well as his grudging observations about politics and his more fulsome reflections on life in the Haight and its aftermath.

Reich asked Garcia to “start us at the beginning,” and he did, describing his early days in San Francisco, noting his father’s death when he was still a young boy and recounting such details as the gift of his first guitar on August 1, 1957, his birthday. He dismissively skipped through his first marriage, never mentioning Sara by name (Mountain Girl was sitting in on the interview, which may have influenced that omission), and Garcia recapped his early interactions with the Beats in North Beach and his first experiences with LSD. Garcia patiently recapped songs for Reich, filling in meanings and explaining how they came together. He talked about freedom and drugs, even entertained a little speculation about Nixon. He did not shy from what might seem difficult to discuss.

Regarding LSD, he noted: “It just changed everything, you know... It freed me because I suddenly realized that my little attempt at having a straight life and doing that was really a fiction and just wasn’t going to work out” (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 42). Regarding performance and uncertainty, he pointed out that “Anarchy and chaos are things that scare everybody, or scare a lot of the people—except for the people that get into it.” Why, Reich asked, don’t they scare you? “Because I’ve had enough experience with it to where I like it. It’s where new stuff happens” (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 125–26). And regarding the revolution, he argued that “It has already happened. We’re living after the

fact. It's a post-revolutionary age. The change is over. The rest of it is a clean-up action" (Garcia, Reich, and Wenner 1972, 134). Those were not the typical comments of a rock star being interviewed by *Rolling Stone*, either today or in 1972. Garcia talked but also listened; this was the rare interview that actually approximates a conversation rather than the consummation of a deal.

If that interview stood out for its range and illumination, it was accompanied by many, many others that captured some aspect of Garcia's willingness to share himself, to dig into his own thinking and allow others to observe him. He was uncommonly vulnerable. To be sure, there were interviews that did not go well—times when he was churlish or when interviewers dragged him over ground so familiar as to be wearying. How many times, after all, did he relay the story of coming up with the name "the Grateful Dead" or was asked to resurrect the Acid Tests? To a remarkable degree, though, Garcia was game, uncommonly vulnerable and even brave. As a result, his interviews laid out a long look inside his thinking.

Among the more noteworthy were several for *Guitar Player* and *Frets* magazines, including a thoughtful and exhaustive look at his technique in 1978 and an illuminating conversation in 1985, just days before he was arrested in Golden Gate Park, while polishing off his drug supply en route to starting rehab. Those conversations included illuminating insights as Garcia described his playing, such as his comment that "if I start a phrase there, it's like constructing one sentence off another before the first sentence is completed. That sort of linguistic analogy is something I'm very attracted to" (Sievert 1978, 126). He also offered a candid, self-deprecating assessment of his limitations: "I'm limited by everything," he said, "my technique, background, education, the things I've heard. I'm limited by being a human being" (Obrecht 2022). It goes without saying that interviews with other rock stars rarely, if ever, yielded reflections of that order.

Elsewhere, Garcia provided journalist Michael Lydon with thoughtful memories of his early life and time with the Dead in 1969 for *Rolling Stone*. He joined the rest of the Dead for an illuminating conversation about music, politics and culture with *CREEM* in 1970 (Robinson 1970).

He appeared frequently on television and radio, including “Late Night with David Letterman” and “The Today Show,” later appearances that were lighter and more amusing than genuinely heartfelt but illustrative of Garcia’s sense of whimsy. “He was funny,” Al Franken noted, a significant compliment from a man who knows funny (Franken 2023). Garcia’s humor could leaven even more serious encounters. When former Prankster Ed McClanahan cornered him on a sunny afternoon in 1971, McClanahan opened by suggesting that he wanted to be able to take some “liberties” with their conversation, “to, uh, interpolate and rearrange things,” as he put it. “Sure,” Garcia responded cheerfully. “You’re gonna lie a little, you mean. Sure, you can say I said anything you feel like, I don’t give a shit” (1972, 86).

Even routine or technical conversations could yield surprising insights. His 1978 interview with *Guitar Player*, for instance, was largely devoted to his approach to the guitar and to his equipment, but Garcia could not help but reveal more of himself. He lamented his lack of a formal musical education and he answered frankly when he was asked if he saw any disadvantages to a guitarist’s perspective. “For me, I think the only danger is being too much in love with guitar playing. The music is the most important thing, and the guitar is only the instrument,” he said, words of the anti-guitar hero if ever there were one (Sievert 1978, 142). Similarly, his 1985 conversation with *Frets* dwelled on such technical questions as how he held his guitar pick and yet also yielded his ruminations on fame, “the thing of constantly being forced to think about yourself all the time” (Obrecht 2022).

Garcia’s openness across long periods of time allows biographers to note patterns that present themselves against the backdrop of his accounts. He tended, for instance, to leap ahead artistically after difficult events, notably the 1961 death of his teenage friend Paul Speegle in a car accident that injured Garcia as well. He replicated that pattern in the Dead: after the band’s traumatic experience at Altamont and the theft of the band’s savings by Lennie Hart they pivoted into the triumphant recording of *Workingman’s Dead* and *American Beauty*; after the exhaustion and logistical overextension that led to the band’s hiatus from October of 1974 to June of 1976 they reemerged into the combustible performances of 1977;

and after Garcia's personal depletion and health crisis plunged him into a coma in 1986 he returned, rested and invigorated, catalyzing the Dead's late 1980s resurgence. Those broad trends are reflected in Garcia's conversations as well, tracing him from engaged and bright to removed.

For those reasons alone, the collected Garcia interviews lie near the center of any serious biographical exploration. They supply a richer base of material than any other source, but they, too, have their limitations. Interviews rely on memory, of course, and memory, even under the best circumstances, is fallible. Garcia long maintained that he witnessed his father drown during a fishing trip when Jerry was four years old. Available evidence suggests that Garcia did not, in fact, bear personal witness to that event, only that he was nearby and that stories of it imprinted themselves on his subconscious and later conscious self. He no doubt believed he had seen his father die and certainly convinced himself of it, but it appears unlikely that his memory of that day was accurate. His interviews on the subject, therefore, encapsulate and extend that distortion of memory.¹

More overarchingly, Garcia's personality also included a healthy dose of self-deprecation, and that often caused him reflexively to reject any grand claims for the importance of his work or for that of the Dead. "There's a certain kind of person that likes what we do," he modestly noted in a 1983 television interview, "like there's a certain kind of person that likes licorice or a certain kind of person that likes buttermilk. It might not be something that everybody likes, but there are a certain kind of people who really do like it" (Blackwood 1983). Explaining the Dead's gathering fame in that same interview, Garcia chuckled, "We're the slowest rising band in history" (Blackwood 1983).

Comments such as that reveal a charming aspect of Garcia's character: his steadfast determination not to take himself too seriously, even when others did. But that also sometimes clipped his reflections. The Dead, as he well knew, exerted a deep, even profound, effect on many of their devotees. That's a subject worth considering. Why alone among the bands of that era did the Dead seem to reach its fans at a near-spiritual level, one that Ram Dass and Joseph Campbell, no strangers to spiritual and mythic experiences, would later describe in religious terms? By any measure, that represented an extraordinary bond between musicians and

their audience, one that it would be interesting to hear Garcia seriously consider. Garcia's humility, however admirable, prevented that in most of his public interviews. It may be modest to compare the influence of the Dead to liking licorice, but it is beneath Garcia's intelligence to suggest that the impact of the Dead on those whose lives the band touched was comparable to the love for a candy.

That tendency toward self-deprecation limits the emotional depth of Garcia's interviews, suggesting that even he withheld some measure of himself from those who questioned him. That's where triangulation comes in, for in order to understand that aspect of Garcia's life—his appeal to others—it is necessary to supplement the interview record with the reflections of others, those steeped in the culture and counterculture. Take, for example, Robert Hunter's reflections in an online journal entry in 1996, a year after the death of his friend and partner. Where Garcia himself publicly disdained his own work as a songwriter, famously noting that it ranked somewhere below feeding the cat when it came to obligations he tended to, he was more introspective—and more self-aware—with Hunter. In his journal entry, told in the form of a letter to Garcia, Hunter recounts a 1969 conversation with Garcia while the two were out walking in Larkspur. In that conversation, Garcia expressed uncharacteristically deep significance to the work the two were doing. He compared it to creating a universe, one that would be appreciated in time and that Hunter's contribution would become more obvious as the years went by. "This is your time in the shadow, but it won't always be that way," Garcia told him. "I'm not going to live a long time. It's not in the cards. Then it'll be your turn" (Hunter 1996). No public interview ever captured Garcia in a mood of such serious self-appraisal, not to mention prescience. It is difficult to imagine him speaking so rapturously of his own contributions to a reporter, knowing that those words would be repeated to a broad audience. It would have offended his sense of modesty. It fell to Hunter to reveal it.

Still, Garcia's interviews provide an exceptionally fertile field for scholars. That is true even as they receded, which they did in the 1990s. The band's extensive clip file extends from the band's earliest years to the last of Garcia's life, and one can feel Garcia's voice fade in his final decade. There, the silence tells its own story. By the beginning of the

1990s, Garcia's heroin addiction, though intermittent, had become a deepening facet of his existence. One contemporary from those years recalls him forcefully shutting off contact with outsiders at shows, projecting an aura of "do not disturb" as he shuffled from dressing room to stage and back (Bralove 2022; Klein 2022). He was in no mood to hobnob with reporters, and that, too, says something about who he was, at least in that time of burgeoning tragedy.

He gave a lighthearted interview to American Movie Channel in 1995 to talk about a favorite movie, *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*. In it, he recalled seeing the film with his mother and hiding his face in terror. The movie was released in 1948, when Garcia was six and still felt the loss of his father, who died in 1946. Under those circumstances, the idea of a "dead thing coming back to life" hit him hard, causing him to "clamp on" to the experience of the film, as he put it (Worth 1995). Garcia's wit and charm shown through in that brief, largely cheerful rumination. It stood out, in part, because to a large degree, his final years, certainly his final months, were marked by his growing remove, by the isolation so familiar to addicts and those who love them. Indeed, the document that may speak most powerfully to that period is one haphazardly (and improperly) preserved in the band's archive: It is a file of Garcia's personal bank statements, with multiple trips each day to a nearby ATM, pulling out a couple hundred dollars several times a day. Its preservation and description in the collection are disturbing, but that ironically underscores its poignancy. One can feel the addiction clawing at him in those statements.

Yet that sad closing act helps to highlight the brightness of what preceded it. For a long, shining, occasionally interrupted period from 1965 through 1990 or so, Garcia spooled out an engaging view of the world that embraced peace and community, expressing in words what he most eloquently presented in music: the expansive, inclusive possibilities of the arts to soothe the soul and connect humanity. Those are themes that run through history, through bohemianism, hippies and counterculture, and that found expression in the music of the Grateful Dead and the life of Jerry Garcia. They are sometimes hard to tease out of his papers. They sometimes lie at the edges and in the crevices of the memories of others or even in stray notes tucked in long-unread folders. They require compari-

son, consideration, and context. But they are there, too, in Garcia's words, sung and spoken, resonant across generations and meaningful today.

Note

1. This conclusion is supported by news accounts of his father's death, which do not mention Jerry being with him when it occurred, a fact that reporters almost certainly would have seized upon if true.

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